

Ranking Systems in Modern Japanese Martial Arts: Modern vs. Classical

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It began as far as we know with *Kano Jigoro* of *Kodokan*, and the first date probably 1883, about a year after he founded the system. He awarded proficiency ranks to his *Judo* men, his exponents, on the basis of *kyu*, which translated as "class" or "ungraded" ranks and "dan". These are, you can say "degrees" if you want and ranks. So that is the beginning of the black-belt system.

The *dan* are the so called "black belts". The people who have black belts are called, by the way, *yudansha*. The *kyu* are *mudansha*: *mu* means "nothing", literally.

Now, the black belt system is the product of the peasant class, not the warrior class. The commoners. Dr. *Kano* was a commoner, a wealthy commoner. His family owned a *sake* mill. He was a merchant, the lowest social class. Had he taken part in *Tokugawa* Japan, he would have been at the bottom of the social level. So, any attempt to rationalize *dan* (black belts) with martial training in Japan is erroneous on the basis of history. You can recognize a modern art by the very fact that it does give black belts and other *kyu* grades. That is one of the unfailing recognitions. Not all of them. Some of them have deliberately avoided it because of all the nonsense and politics that goes with it.

The classical arts do not use the black-belt system. Now, classical arts, you must recall, run between the 8th century and 1877. But what did they use, because the Japanese, like any society, are rank and prestige conscious. As they learned from China, court ranks and so on were important in social structure. So, they used this system which they called the *menkyo* system. The exponents of classical arts receive *menkyo* and their evidence is shown on a *densho* or *makimono*. That would be a certificate of your proficiency at a certain level.

Now, there are different levels of *menkyo* but far fewer than black-belt. Black belt is very finely divided as are the *kyu* below it. The basis of it, the basis of the *kyu* and *dan* system is commercial. Don't think it isn't. Even in Japan. It was created for prestige and recognition, true, but for commercial purpose to keep *Kodokan* in business, originally. It has grown out of proportion today, not only in Japan but in the West. Many misuses and abuses, but that is not our thing to talk about today.

The *menkyo* system has a great integrity. There are far fewer levels. Generally there will be between three to five levels of *menkyo* over the whole life span. Compare that to modern systems. Depending on the system, there could be as many as ten *kyu* in some systems and ten different grades of *dan*. So there is already twenty subdivisions under the present system. The warrior system, from three to five; I have heard of one with nine and I have heard of one with

two. So, my experience is, they will range from two to nine levels; far less than the *kyu* or the *dan* system. So, what the *kyu* and *dan* system means is, no big thing.

Now, I will explain it to you on the basis of a hypothetical standard. The lowest possible *menkyo* can be called *okuiri*. This relates to *Zen*. *Oku* is "secret"; *iri* means "to enter", making entrance to secrecy. If you remember yesterday's lecture, I gave you the difference between the use of *okuden* in China and Japan. In China it was to "confirm" enlightenment. "You have arrived son, here is your certificate". In Japan it is a certificate to allow you to enter onto the path that will lead you to enlightenment. Prolonged.

The *okuiri* then is your lowest award. It is a teacher's license of the very lowest grade and it varies with the *ryu*. The most conservative of them will require four years of training. That is usually done under a headmaster. Untiring, unswerving dedication to a system. Four years minimum. In some *ryu* that goes up to as high as eight years, apprenticeship.

The next one is called *mokuroku*. *Mokuroku* simply means some kind of a register or a catalogue. Your name, after you have gotten through this stage is now entered in the official catalogues of the *ryu*. The registries. Before that your name does not appear.

There are usually two levels here. The lower one, *shomokuroku* means "beginning". *Sho*, *hatsu* and *go*, "afterwards". It is not always true. Some do not use this, but it is possible two levels of *mokuroku*. This *shomokuroku* is at least from eight to fifteen years. The *gomokuroku* should even go higher, seventeen, training, resident training under a headmaster, not a correspondence course.

The next one, *menkyo*. *Menkyo* means "license". You are now considered to be a licensed instructor. This is the level where you can stand on your own feet and your *ryu* will back you up as authorized to teach. Before that you were more or less an assistant. *Menkyo* runs roughly fifteen, seventeen years, up to twenty five years of training. No compromise in this by the way, no matter how good. I will explain why in a bit.

Beyond that there are others. Generally, it is *kaiden*. *Kaiden*, around thirty years experience.

Those are the levels. Now you can see why this would not work in a commercial school. So the boy comes up and says, "Hay, uhhhhh, I've been training for four weeks, where is my orange belt?" "Well, son, I hate to tell you this, but you got maybe at least four years more of training to go, then we'll talk about your first belt." "Whaddya mean, my first belt? I've been paying you good, you know.", So on and so on. It does not lend itself to the commercial system. But integrity is fantastic. You will never find a *mokuroku* holder who is better than a *menkyo* holder. If he cannot get equal to this standard, he does not get it. Even though he is the father of the guy running the *dojo*. They do not break that. I will give you an example of it's integrity.

There is a *ryu* in Japan where the head family, the one that originated it five to six hundred years ago -- direct descendant, 20th generation -- does not train in the martial attitude of this school. He has a bad heart. He is not allowed to do any physical training. He has absolutely no skill with a sword or in anything. He could easily write his own diploma or have his grandfather

write it, stamp it, hang it up on the wall. It is his right. It is his family. But he will not do it. There is someone who is not "blood" family who is given authority to teach "for" him based on his qualifications. That is how airtight it is.

When you hear someone speaking of "I do such and such and such a kind of jujutsu. I'm a fifth grade black belt in *jujutsu*." Well, one of two things, he is a liar or has been had. No *jujutsu* form in Japan gives black belts or *kyu*. They use the *menkyo* system. What it could mean, and this is its positive value, is that the system is using the word "*jujutsu*", but the system itself was founded outside of Japan, or even in Japan by a group that has nothing to do with classical tradition. Does not care one-way or the other. They have made a new system and they do use the *kyu* and the *dan*, but use the old word "*jujutsu*". They are borrowing an old word. In other words, there is honesty and integrity in the system. It is possible. But it is not a *jutsu* system. But on the contrary any *do* system, *Judo*, *Jujutsu*'s parallel, does use *kyu* and *dan*. *Kendo*, *naginata-do*, *iaido*, with any kind of *do*, you must expect to find *kyu* and *dan*. So, there are these two parallels, if you can keep them straight: *jutsu* for *menkyo* system, *do* for *kyu* and *dan*.

"Did the jutsu then commonly denote the more ancient systems?"

Yes. They are the ancestors of the *do* forms. There is no *do* form that stands alone- no true *do* form-without an ancestor or *jutsu* ancestor. There has to be a parentage. Sometimes it is not easy to trace because it has been obscured in some way; history has forgotten. But they all have a root in *jutsu* somewhere.

I think that is a very important thing today because there is so much confusion. Some of it is honest confusion. There is an awful lot of conning going on. People are just out for a fast buck. They are taking words which have common currency and have some kind of prestige connected with them and people are baited. They pay their fees; they learn an art and maybe, good or bad, I do not know, a system of ranking is used to attract them. If you took the rank system away, you probably would have very few students. Some psychology is involved here.

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